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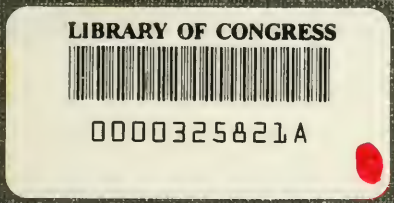

UNVEILING

of

Memorial Tablet

to

DANIEL BISSELL

The Patriot Spy of the Revolution

at

Windsor, Conn., October 18, 1919

Under the Auspices of
Colonel Jeremiah Wadsworth Branch
Connecticut Society
Sons of the American Revolution.

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PROGRAMME

Invocation
by the Chaplain

HYMN
America

UNVEILING OF MEMORIAL
By
Master John Bissell Carroll
A descendant in the tenth generation from John Bissell, the founder of the family in America

PRESENTATION OF MEMORIAL TO THE CHAPTER
Chairman of Memorial Committee
F. Clarence Bissell

RECEPTION OF MEMORIAL BY THE CHAPTER
and presentation to Conn. Society, S. A. R.
By
* John M. Parker, Jr., President
Colonel Jeremiah Wadsworth Chapter

RECEPTION OF MEMORIAL BY
CONN. SOCIETY, S. A. R.
By
Dr. George C. F. Williams, President
of Connecticut Society

Address by
Prof. Edward F. Humphrey, Ph. D.
of Trinity College
a member of Conn. Society, S. A. R.

MUSIC
The Star Spangled Banner

Benediction
by the Chaplain

*In the absence of the President, his place was taken by George S. Godard, Vice-President.

Sergeant Daniel Bissell, Exponent of Real-Americanism.

An address delivered by Edward Frank Humphrey at the Unveiling of a Memorial Tablet to Daniel Bissell, The Patriotic Spy of the Revolution at Windsor, Connecticut, October 18, 1919, under the auspices of Colonel Jeremiah Wadsworth Branch, Sons of the American Revolution.

Colonel Jeremiah Wadsworth Branch, Sons of the American Revolution, and friends are gathered here today to dedicate another shrine to Americanism, an Americanism, in this instance, expressed not in words but in a life of complete devotion to our country's service, first as Patriot throughout the War of the Revolution, and then as Pioneer, winning new lands from the wilderness to add to America's greatness.

There are within our borders today those abstract theorists who hold that the sole test of Americanism is "Culture"; others claim that ability to speak the English language is the criterion of nationality; while an extreme school contends that America is not yet and must never be allowed to become a nation. Israel Zangwill, who long since gave us the false analogy of "America, the Melting-Pot," in his latest work on the subject defines nationality as a "State of Mind." The Yale Review very aptly remarks, "His little book on nationalities . . is likely to impress many readers as the idle vaporings of a man without a country.

The examples of our Revolutionary heroes; Nathan Hale, George Washington, Colonel Knowlton, Daniel Bissell, and their compatriots have long since taught us that Nationalism is neither physical nor mental. It cannot be put off or on at will. It is a moral and spiritual force. It defies definition even though it is so intimate that it cannot be denied or betrayed without a feeling of shame. It is as intense as religion and like religion it has its Saints, Shrines, and Martyrs.

The man whose heart does not expand, who does not experience a spiritual uplift before the altars of nationalism is dead to some of the noblest emotions of the human brest. Concord Bridge, The Lake of the Four Cantons, Vimy Ridge, and this monument to Sergeant Daniel Bissell are but outward and visible signs of the spiritual grace of nationalism.

We are here to assist in perpetuating through this imperishable altar of granite and bronze the memory of the supreme patriotism of a son of Ancient Windsor, Daniel Bissell, Patriot Spy of the Revolutionary War. Another son of Ancient Windsor, Stiles the historian, has said, "If honor and gratitude are due to him who boldly maintains a just cause by force of arms and personal bravery, how much more is it due to him, who, renouncing glory's brightest dream, takes upon himself the unenviable character and office of a spy in his country's service. . . Such was Hale whose martyr memory is precious to every patriots heart; such, too, . . . was Daniel Bissell of Windsor."

The services of Daniel Bissell were such as to earn for him the Honorary Badge of Military Merit, accompanied by an Honorary Certificate signed by General Washington himself wherein the following note is made of his special service to America: "Whereas Sergeant Daniel Bissell of the Second Connecticut Regiment has performed some important service, within the immediate knowledge of the Commander-in-Chief, in which his fidelity, perserverance and good sense, were not only conspicuously manifested, but his general line of conduct throughout a long course of service, having been not only unspotted but highly deserving of commendation.

Now, therefore, Know Ye, that the aforesaid Sergeant Bissell, hath fully and truly deserved, and hath been properly invested with, the Honorary Badge of Military Merit, and is entitled to pass and repass all Guards and Military Posts, as freely and as amply as any Commissioned Officer

whatever; and is further recommended to that notice which a Brave and Faithful Soldier deserves from his countrymen."

This certificate from the hands of General Washington himself furnishes the clue to the importance of the work assigned to Sergeant Bissell. Washington realized the extreme importance of the service of military-intelligence. He would entrust it to none but his most intimate personal associates; he kept personal control of everything connected with the spy-system. So much import was attached to absolute secrecy that we find his own letters have very carefully eliminated even the names of his most trusted sources of information. He even caused false papers, charges of "Desertion to the Enemy" to be registered against some of his most trusted men. Such a charge we find entered against Sergeant Bissell. Fortunately in his case it is easy to disprove this charge. In many other cases it is not so easy, historical evidence would discredit some of those very men upon whom Washington placed most reliance. If Washington did use the system of "Double-Spies" (Spies working for both sides), we do know that his system worked in 1781 when it was subjected to the final test. Washington secured complete and exact information of all the plans of General Clinton whilst at the same time he was able to deceive Gen. Clinton as to the plans of the Franco-American forces. This was the test of the service of 1781 which earned for Daniel Bissell an Honorary Badge of Military Merit.

The year 1781 was the critical year of the American Revolution. The Patriots had fought for six years and success still seemed as distant as in the dark days of Valley Forge. The Morale, the spiritual force, of America was drooping. Recruiting was at a stand-still and money was unobtainable. When Washington had started for his Connecticut Conference with Rochambeau in 1780, all the money he could get together was $8,000 in paper currency and more than half of this had been expended before he had crossed New York state. Had not Governor Trumbull extended to him the hospitality of the state, the American delegation would have arrived at the Allied Conference in the condition of bankruptcy. Arnold's treason reflected the morale of many patriots and suspicion and rumor were rife that others and men higher-up were disaffected.

The American cause was at its most critical stage and the Allied Command decided here, as they were to again in the crisis of 1918, to stake the outcome one a great campaign, Yorktown. This was to be vastly more complicated than any so far undertaken; the possibilities of a miscarriage of the plans were innumerable. The campaign required the completest liason between all branches of the service. Also it required the completest information regarding the plans of the enemy and absolute secrecy as to the American objectives.

On July 28th, 1781, De Grasse, Commander of the French Fleet which had but just arrived in American waters, sent word to the Allied Command that he favored an attack on Cornwalls since it promised an easier and surer success than the New York campaign which was at a stand-still. This Washington and Rochambeau took under advisement. On August 17th they sent word to De Grasse that they had decided to move the American and French armies to the Chesepeake.

But a great deal had been done in those twenty days. Word was not sent, even to De Grasse, until the armies were already under way. In the interval on August 13th Washington had selected Daniel Bissell for a perilous mission into New York City for the double purpose of securing information relative to the enemy and of spreading false propoganda relative to the American plans. We do not possess the instructions which Colonel Humphreys, acting for General Washington, placed in the hands

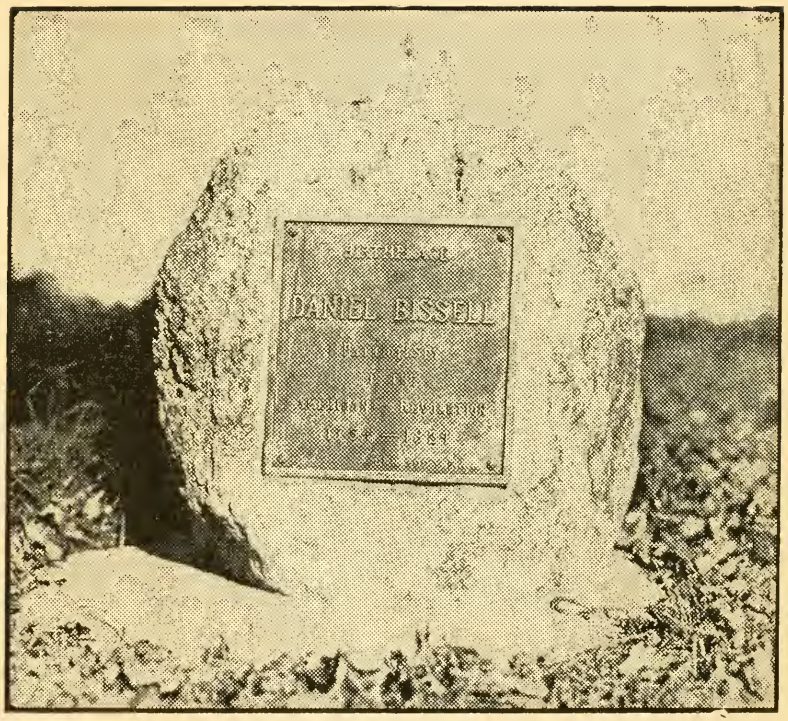
of Sergeant Bissell, yet it requires no great amount of historical immagination to reconstruct them. A rumor was afloat that Clinton intended to evacuate New York and transfer his forces to the South. Sergeant Bissell was to learn the numbers, disposition and plans of the enemy. More important was the information which Sergeant Bissell was to convey to the British, in his character as a "Deserter from the American Army." In his own account of the instructions which he received Sergeant Bissell uses this significant sentence, "Then followed all the probable questions that would be asked me, in the several examinations, to gether with their answers."

General Clinton was completely misled. He learned that De Grasse was coming but he was led to believe that this new French fleet would join the old one at Rhode Island. Then too, although the Patriot forces began to draw off toward New Jersey on August 17th and were all in motion by the 24th, Clinton was kept in absolute ignorance of their objective until September 2nd. A very clever report spread through the City of New York that Colonel John Laurens had just returned from Paris with the news that the Emperor of Germany had declared himself the ally of Great Britain and that, in consequence, France was withdrawing her fleet and troops to concentrate them in the West Indies. So cleverly was this story concocted and so skillfully was it introduced into New York that even Rivington's loyalist Gazette accepted it as true and published it in all seriousness, rejoicing in the good news. Such was the propoganda which must have been included in the instructions to Sergeant Bissell.

Sergeant Bissell, "deserter from the American Army," succeeded in entering New York and remaining at liberty for three days, at the end of which time he enrolled in Arnold's regiment. When, at length, General Clinton learned of the Allied objective he tried to draw off the New England forces by Arnold's expedition against New London on September 6th. Sergeant Bissell knew of the plans for this raid but he was already so far advanced with the fever that he could not make his escape. Taken ill, he was sent to the hospital at Flushing where he was kept until December then to be removed to Harlem Heights. He remained in the hospital until May when he was taken out and assigned to Quarter-Master Sergeant's duties. Here he was able to learn considerable of the plans of the British and in September he escaped to the American lines; there to resume his place in the ranks and to serve out the remainder of the war.

Such was the Revolutionary record of Daniel Bissell. Yet in dedicating this monument here in Ancient Windsor I would, in closing, call attention to the After-War record of Daniel Bissell. I would add to his service record the rank of "Pioneer." Returning to Windsor at the close of the war in 1783 he remained there only until 1790 when he, with the wife married in 1789, joined that great army of pioneers who moved forward to conquer for America an empire in the wilderness. I cannot agree with the historian Stiles that "His naturally fine constitution never recovered from the privations and sufferings to which he was exposed during his service as a spy within the British lines at New York. . . and tended much to cripple his energies and to thwart the success which those energies would otherwise have accomplised. "What greater success could a Patriot of the Revolution than to do his part in wining this new empire for his country and to leave therein a large family to assume responsible positions.

Such, in brief, was the spirit of Daniel Bissell, a Patriot and Pioneer, and true exponent of Americanism.



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